
GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

***“School Choice in the District of Columbia: Opening
Door for Parents and Students”***

Statement of
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Mayor
District of Columbia

Committee on
Education, Labor and the Workforce
United States House of Representatives

Chairman Congressman John A. Boehner,
Ranking Member Congressman George Miller

Committee on
Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

Chairman Congressman Thomas M. Davis,
Ranking Member Congressman Henry A. Waxman III

**Tuesday, June 24, 2003
2154 Rayburn House Office Building
2:00 p.m.**

Good morning Chairman Davis and Chairman Boehner and other members of the Government Reform, and Education, Labor and the Workforce Committees. I am Anthony A. Williams, Mayor of the District of Columbia. Chairman Davis, I greatly appreciate the leadership, support and encouragement you have provided our great city and look forward to continuing our partnership as we work together to accomplish even greater initiatives for the citizens of the District— starting, I hope, with a robust initiative to support education in our nation’s capital. Chairman Boehner, we are delighted to be working with you and your committee on a District-related initiative and look forward to expanding your engagement in the education of our young people. In this spirit, I am pleased to come before you today to discuss school choice and expanding educational options for parents and students in the District of Columbia.

As you know, education is a major priority for my administration. My vision for the children of the District of Columbia is that every child, regardless of the school they attend, will have access to a high quality education in a healthy and safe environment. I envision a city in which every young person will: 1) come to school ready to learn, and leave with the necessary skills to be successful in today’s technologically advanced society; 2) be taught to be responsible citizens and to make valuable contributions to their local and global communities; and 3) have access to adequate social services to support their learning. While we have made major progress, we still have a long way to go before realizing this vision.

Let me acknowledge that many good things are happening in the District’s schools. First, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), under the leadership of Superintendent Paul Vance and the Board of Education, has launched an initiative to transform our lowest-performing schools, infusing them with new leadership, staff and additional resources. We now have identified 15 of these Transformation Schools and early indications show us they are making a difference. My administration strongly supports DCPS in this initiative, and has begun to provide wrap-around supports services at five of these Transformation Schools. By providing a host of family support services from District of Columbia agencies at these schools, we hope to

allow teachers to relinquish their de facto roles as part-time health and welfare counselors to children and their families, and allow them to focus completely on their role as educators.

In addition, last year DCPS underwent a massive central office transformation to streamline services and ensure that more resources flow directly to the classroom. Together with the District Council, we have provided record pay increases to our teachers, bringing entry level pay closer to parity with our suburban neighbors.

Third, DCPS has a strong out-of-boundary program that enables thousands of students to attend the public schools of their choice. We have several marquee programs focusing on college preparation, the arts, and bilingual education, to name just a few, that attract parents and children from throughout the city.

Finally, just a few weeks ago the Secretary of Education announced the approval of the DCPS's State Accountability Plan which I proudly forwarded to the US Department of Education earlier this year. This plan demonstrates great progress in how the District will comply with the *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

As you know, the District also has a very robust public charter school movement; we believe it is the strongest in the nation. We currently have 42 charter schools, which provide approximately 11,500 students with a range of educational programs including math and science, technology, arts, English as and Second Language (ESL) and dual language immersion, character development, public policy, and college preparatory study. These schools offer many approaches to learning, including individualized instruction, small academies, and schools within schools.

Recognizing that significant progress has been made since 1995 when Congress passed the District of Columbia School Reform Act, the District public school system still faces an abundance of challenges. Many students enter school with developmental challenges that have not been effectively identified and addressed. Moreover, the District must do more to improve student achievement scores in kindergarten through 12th grade. In school year (SY) 2000 -

2001, some 25 percent of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) students scored below basic on the Stanford-9 Reading test and 36 percent scored below basic in math. The more significant challenges include a large special education population, increasing demands for adequate facilities for both traditional and charter schools, and the need to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Thus, despite the steady increases in local funding¹, and other efforts to support our public schools, I have heard firsthand from hundreds of parents who feel there are no practical and easy alternatives for their children within the current systems of public schools.

This gets to the crux of the matter. Our dynamic Transformation Schools Initiative, our liberal out-of-boundary enrollment programs, and our robust charter schools are providing real choices for some parents. But there are still countless students whose schools are not among those on the fast track to transformation and for whom there are no practical charter school alternatives. Even if we are successful in increasing the tempo on these initiatives, there will be tens of thousands of students still waiting for more choices. I cannot tell parents that they must continue to wait while there are other outlets in our midst.

In short, we need to reexamine the way we do business. It is time that we explore other solutions to ensure that every child has access to a quality education in the District. I have confidence that our public school system is getting better, but that does not mean that I, as the elected Mayor of this city, should ignore other educational assets currently at our disposal. To that end, I welcome the federal government's interest in our public schools and the success of the District's children.

Along with City Council Education Committee Chair Kevin Chavous and Board of Education President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, I support a three-sector approach that would focus new federal resources towards increasing the availability of quality educational options for District students and families. This strategy would require a significant and on-going investment toward the following: 1) the development of a federally funded scholarship program for students to attend non-public schools; 2) permanent and predictable of support for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) targeted at leadership, instructional excellence and student

¹ The Mayor and the Council have increased funding to public education by approximately 40% since 1997.

achievement; and 3) a fiscally sound and comprehensive approach to the acquisition and renovation of charter schools facilities.

Why a three-sector approach? The most compelling reasons focus on fairness, the legacy of federal-District relations, and a strong sense that choice means the most when the number of quality educational options is maximized. Specifically, I mean that while DCPS faces considerable administrative and operational challenges that transcend any particular funding level, our public schools are paying the price of a legacy of disinvestment and crumbling school buildings, many constructed originally by the federal government. While bearing the costs associated with both a local school district and a state system, the city has the tax base of neither. As the recent GAO report² documented, the city needs ongoing assistance from the federal government in addressing this structural imbalance.

I don't believe that there is such a thing as too many good educational options for our children. Parents ought not be compelled to choose a public school, a public charter school, or a private school solely by default. In other words, we should strive for a situation where all the city's educational assets complement each other and offer parents positive choices beyond one-size-fits-all paradigms. I hope the Congress will adopt – and fund – initiatives to make the city a national model of public and private schools choices for urban education. We have the opportunity – right now – to embrace a new vision for the education of African-American, Latino, and lower-income children from all backgrounds.

Federally-Funded Scholarship Program

As I stated at the Committee on Government Reform hearing on May 9, 2003, I support the President's desire to create a scholarship program in the District. I believe, if done effectively, such a program could truly expand choice to low-income families, who currently do not have the same freedom of choice enjoyed by more affluent families. Understandably the issue of public support for private and parochial school tuitions raises fierce emotions on both sides, but there is a large body of research that speaks to its merits.

² “District of Columbia: Structural Imbalance and Management Issues. [GAO-03-666](#) May 22, 2003.”

Dozens of studies, including those conducted by voucher opponents, have confirmed that school vouchers increase parental satisfaction with their child's school. Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, Maine and Vermont all have some form of voucher program and, by and large, these programs have been successful in increasing options for families. In addition, eight rigorous studies of six cities by research teams including scholars from Harvard, Princeton, the University of Chicago, Indiana University, the Brookings Institution and the Manhattan Institute, have all confirmed that school choice boosts the academic achievement of inner-city African-American students. A recent study prepared by a team led by William G. Howell and Patrick J. Wolf surveyed more than 1,000 African American students in the District who attend nonpublic schools through support from the Washington Scholarship Fund. These students gained almost 10 national percentile points (NPR) in math and reading achievement after the first year and an average of 6.3 NPR after two years of being in private school.³ Finally, it has been proven that school choice increases educational attainment; inner-city minority students are more likely to obtain a college degree if they attend private or parochial school, when compared with their public high school counterparts.⁴

I believe that any scholarship program for the District must recognize the reality and needs of the city and must be crafted with full participation of the city's elected leadership. I am grateful to Chairman Davis and Secretary Paige for their willingness to collaborate with us and accommodate many of our concerns in the course of drafting the bill before us today. I feel strongly that the duly elected leaders of our municipal government and others have a major role in designing a program that works for us and our children. I have consulted with several key education leaders and have engaged in focus groups and discussion in order to develop consensus on what an effective scholarship program should look like. Following are some key elements that arose from those discussions, most of which are already reflected in the draft bill before the committees:

³ Howell et al, "School Vouchers and Academic Performance..." op. cit.; see also William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, with Patrick J. Wolf and David E. Campbell, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington: Brookings, 2002), pp. 150-52.

⁴ Derek Neal, "The Effects of Catholic Secondary Schooling on Educational Achievement," *Journal of Labor Economics* 15:1, 1997.

- focus on low-income parents. We propose a ceiling of 185% of the Federal Poverty Level or perhaps more. We are pleased to see this concept included in the draft bill under discussion today;
- emphasize opportunities for new students – those not currently in nonpublic schools -- so that federal funds do not merely supplant existing financial aid offered by other institutions. We are pleased that the bill before us gives preference to students *currently* attending low-performing public schools;
- limit participation to schools in the District. We are pleased to see this tenet is included in a bill introduced by Mr. Davis;
- require schools to admit all eligible students and, in cases where grades or schools were oversubscribed, admit students based on lottery. The goal is not to “cream” the best and brightest students, but rather to give the neediest children opportunities they would otherwise not have. We are pleased that the draft bill does establish a random selection process. Moreover Congressman Davis has assured me that the final version of this bill will clearly reflect that participating schools are prohibited from discriminating against students on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, or religion.
- encompass a comprehensive accountability and evaluation component that would allow for solid longitudinal data collection and analysis so that years from now we can speak rather authoritatively about the relative success of each of our educational approaches and their impact on student achievement. The bill before us does establish a regime whereby the U.S. Department of Education shall receive information for this purpose. The city would like language added that would also grant the city access to this information so that it might conduct a complementary, yet not redundant study. This request would be consistent with the District’s ongoing efforts to strengthen our state-level oversight role with respect to data collection and reporting on all of the schools in the city;

- additional supports to help families assess information, and transition and adapt to private schools. The current bill does allow for such support, but limits the source of funding to the three percent administration set aside, which we fear may be too constrictive; and
- a competitive bidding process to select a private or public entity to administer the program. If a nonpublic entity is selected, the city would like to have assurance that the leadership of the organization include District elected officials and educational leaders or otherwise ensure that the city has input as to how the program is administered.

Finally, I understand that there is a need for a distinct legislative strategy that would authorize this new scholarship program, and that the other two sectors may be better addressed through other legislative vehicles. I am grateful that the Executive branch and key leadership in the Congress are committed to the three-sector educational reform effort. I look forward to working with them to ensure that support for DCPS and charter schools are achieved by other means. Although the two other sectors will follow another legislative track, I want to outline briefly the nature of the need and support we are seeking.

Permanent and Predictable of Support for DCPS

Like many urban cities across the country, the District of Columbia has suffered major increases in the cost of education. This is due, in part, to spiraling special education costs, but is also related to the continuing structural imbalance that plagues the District as documented in the recent the GAO report⁵.

The District of Columbia, with its limited tax base and limited taxing authority can never achieve the fiscal parity that would support the delivery of comparable state level services. However, the Department of Education holds it accountable and measures the District for effectiveness by the same yardsticks as its state counterparts.

⁵ "District of Columbia: Structural Imbalance and Management Issues. [GAO-03-666](#) May 22, 2003."

In a comparative review of the amount of federal, state and local revenue committed to elementary and secondary education in five states with similar demographics as well as overall expenditures in the area of education, it is important to note that the District bears an excessive fiscal burden in supporting these mandates (see Table 1 below.) While the state contribution ranged among this group from approximately thirty percent in Vermont to sixty four percent in Delaware, all of the other states contribute significantly to the available local dollars. In contrast, the District bears the inordinate burden of an eighty three percent local contribution.

Table 1: Comparison of Federal, State and Local Contributions among Comparable State

State or other area	Total	Federal		State		Local and Intermediate	
		Amount	% of total	Amount	% of total	Amount	% of total
Delaware	\$913,615,548	\$69,240,402	7.6	\$588,210,603	64.4	\$243,784,465	26.7
District of Columbia	\$706,935,000	\$116,363,000	16.5	---	---	\$587,111,055	83.1
North Dakota	\$682,418,716	\$84,339,151	12.4	\$280,238,399	41.1	\$280,741,500	41.1
South Dakota	\$794,255,517	\$79,521,966	10.0	\$282,517,823	35.6	\$408,047,256	51.4
Vermont	\$861,642,698	\$44,751,668	5.2	\$253,572,082	29.4	\$547,924,359	63.6
Wyoming	\$702,001,318	\$47,202,685	6.7	\$330,208,062	47.0	\$312,642,835	44.5
Average	\$776,811,466	\$73,569,812	10	\$346,949,394	43	\$396,708,578	52

* This table includes states with comparable total revenues and populations to the District of Columbia.

Additional support from the federal government, whether in the form of state level cost assumption or investments in academic achievement, would help address this imbalance and free up local resources to make needed investments in our public schools. New federal dollars could be targeted to those activities that would build infrastructure and increase capacity to serve both general education students and students with special needs.

Charter Schools Facilities

The 12,000 students in the public charter schools of Washington, DC learn in a variety of facilities of varying and often inadequate size and quality. Unfortunately, there are major challenges for charter schools in securing facilities that inhibit high quality teaching and

learning. We hope the federal government can help with funding for restructuring (existing facilities and provide equity for a non-profit organization to purchase and renovate the facilities on behalf of the charter schools. I look forward to working to your support for this innovative approach to solving the facilities needs of our charter schools.

Conclusion

Finally, Chairman Davis and Chairman Boehner, as we know, emotions run high on the issue of federal funding for private school scholarships in Washington, DC. Leaders from both major political parties have weighed in. Advocates and scholars from around the country have opined about what is best or not for our children. Even media markets in China have even picked up this story. For me, the issue is more localized. I am not accountable to anyone with an ideological agenda. I *am* accountable to the students and parents in my city who all yearn for and deserve the same thing -- our confidence in their ability to make the right educational choices if given the opportunity.

I am pleased that the President and members of Congress are keenly interested in helping us expand choices for our families. I do not know whether private school scholarships are the right thing nationally or if they will be the right thing for the District in ten years. I do believe that along with the ongoing reform of our traditional public school system and our burgeoning charter school movement, that they are valuable elements in giving hope to many parents who seek a quality education in our nation's capital.

I hope one day to share with you a glorious dilemma. A mother who comes to me and says, "Mayor, I don't know what to do. Do I apply for a scholarship? Do I enroll my child in a new innovative charter school? Or do I enroll my child in a specialized math, science, or foreign language program at my neighborhood DCPS school?"

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members for your continued support of the District of Columbia.